
Strategies & Instructions

Activity Guide #2 – Which Applicants Change FAFSA Data? – May 2002

Dear Partners,

Our three Activity Guides provide strategies and instructions to help you make the most of the Quality Analysis Verification Tool. While Activity Guide #1 focuses on *Analyzing Changes to FAFSA Fields* and Activity Guide #3 on *Assessing Institutional Verification Profiles*, this Activity Guide #2 has been designed to help you:

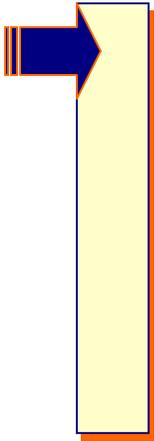
- **Identify ranges of applicants where changes to FAFSA information are most pronounced**
- **Identify ranges of applicants where changes to FAFSA information are associated with EFC increase, that is, the reduction of aid eligibility**
- **Identify ranges of applicants where changes to FAFSA information are associated with EFC decrease, that is, the increase of aid eligibility**

This document provides detailed instructions on which reports to run and what to look for while carrying out analyses. The instructions assume that:

- **“Initial” and “paid on” data have been imported into the software and the validation process has been completed (for help on importing data see <http://gaprogram.air.org/download/toolforschool-ISIR%20Guidance.doc> and the desk reference available at <http://sfadownload.ed.gov/softqat0203.htm>).**
- **Institutional verification edit profiles have been established and initial verification flag has been set (for step by step instructions on establishing verification flags refer to <http://gaprogram.air.org/download/ReportingVerification.doc>).**
- **A query selecting applicants who were selected for school verification has been written (see Step #1 of Activity Guide #1 insert URL here).**

The analytic activities described can be used to identify the applicants who are most likely to experience changes to problematic FAFSA fields. See Activity Guide #1 for help [identifying which FAFSA fields are problematic](#). Activity Guide #3 will assist you in [evaluating your current institutional verification profiles](#).

About this document ...



The analytic strategies offered here are suggestions to help you get started with your own analysis. Please feel free to tailor these instructions in ways that best suit your institution's needs – and make full use of any and all of the 15 Quality Analysis Tool reports. If you find ways to improve upon our suggestions or have suggestions of your own, we invite – indeed, we need – your thoughts. A spirit of collaboration has infused the Quality Assurance Program for nearly 20 years. We would welcome the insights of any Title IV institution on how to effectively analyze changes applicants make to FAFSA information.

Step 1

Planning Analysis

The first decision you must make whenever analyzing change to FAFSA information with the QA Tool is deciding which type of FAFSA change to focus on. There are two types of changes to FAFSA information: changes stemming from verification, and changes applicants make on their own. We recommend that you analyze these two types of change separately. The key advantage of analyzing institutionally verified cases is the ability to assume that the “paid on” information is correct. After you have created queries to separate the two types of changes to FAFSA information (see Activity Guide #1 insert URL for details), you will also need to plan additional aspects of your analysis.

➤ **Which FAFSA item(s) do you want to use to define groups of applicants?**

The reports discussed in this activity examine differences in the propensity of changes to FAFSA information and the effect these changes have on aid eligibility across different ranges of values on a single FAFSA item. Therefore, you will need to select a FAFSA item to define your *Field Increments*. Income and EFC are often used for this purpose. The most problematic FAFSA data elements you may have identified in Activity Guide #1 are also excellent candidates for defining groups of applicants to analyze. You will need to create a separate *Field Increment* code

and run separate reports for each of the FAFSA fields that you want to use to define value ranges.

In order to set up your own *Field Increments* follow these instructions:

1. Select *Tools / Custom Formats / Field Increments ...*
2. Press the *Add* button
3. Specify a *Code* and *Description* in the corresponding boxes
4. Select the *Field* to base the ranges on
5. Enter a *Minimum*, *Maximum*, and *Increment* to indicate where you want the range to begin, end, and how wide a range of values you want to include in each grouping. Give some thought to the appropriate range and increment for the FAFSA field of interest. It might make sense to establish an *increment* of one for reports of family size, but for reports of income you would want to use categories thousands of dollars wide. As a general rule, the minimum and maximum should be set to include the typical range of applicant responses. The increment should be set so as to divide the range of values into 3 to 10 groups
6. Press the *Save* button
7. Press the *OK* button

See page 11 of the QA Tool desk reference for further instructions on creating *Field Increments* (<http://sfadownload.ed.gov/softqat0203.htm>).

➤ **Are you interested in examining the relationship between FAFSA change and EFC or Pell Grant eligibility?**

The *Field Range Report with Corrected Field Counts* displays information about the propensity to change FAFSA information and the impact of these changes on EFC. The *Pell Corrected Records Report* examines differences across a range of values in the propensity of FAFSA changes and accompanying changes in Pell Grant eligibility. Choose the report that meets your institution's needs. You may want to consider conducting parallel analysis using both types of reports.

➤ **Do you want to look at dependent and independent students separately?**

Both the *Field Range Report with Corrected Records Counts* and the *Pell Corrected Records Report* provide the option of looking at results for only dependent or independent students. This is an option in addition to the *Selection Criteria / Query* functionality available in all reports. Obviously, FAFSA items that measure parent attributes are not applicable to the need calculation of independent students. Therefore, when the *Field Increment* being used for the analysis is based on parent information, analysis should be restricted to dependent students. If your institutional verification practices treat student reported information differently for dependent and independent applicants, you may also want to analyze student information separately by dependency status.

➤ **Do you want to restrict your analysis beyond verification and dependency status?**

Depending on the FAFSA field you select to define ranges of applicants, you may want to consider restricting your analysis beyond verification and dependency status. There are two means available to accomplish this objective.

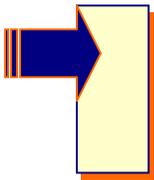
First, you can create a *Field Increment* code that excludes cases with the values of zero. Some potentially interesting FAFSA items – Worksheets A, B, and C – may not be applicable to large segment of your aid population. If you are interested in examining such a range excluding non-applicable cases, start the increment at “1” (or other positive number), rather than zero. This will exclude applicants reporting a value of zero from the analysis. Results for applicants with “blanks” in the field used to define a *Field Increment* will be printed on a separate row of the report.

Second, you can add an additional logical condition to your “school verification” (or “non-verified”) query. For example, assume that you want to look at how corrections to FAFSA information vary by income, but want to limit analysis to independent students who report family sizes greater than one. Follow the steps below:

1. Within the software select *Tools/Query*

2. Press the *Retrieve* button
3. Select the “verified students” or “non-verified students” query you created during Activity #1
4. **CHANGE** the entry in the *Title* box to reflect the additional criteria, “Verified Students with Family Size Greater than One.” If you fail to give the query a new title you will overwrite your existing query
5. In the *Field* box select *Student’s Number of Family Members*
6. In the *operator* box select the equals greater than (>)
7. In the *value* box enter *1*
8. Press the *And* button and then the *Append* button, adding the logical condition into the large *Criteria* box
9. You could add the *Dependency Status = I* condition to the query as indicated in steps 5, 6, 7, and 8 **OR** simply use the *Dependency Status* box available in the *Field Range Report with Corrected Records Counts* and *Pell Corrected Records Report* when you print the report
10. Press the *Save* button

Use these ten steps, substituting your desired logical condition in steps 5, 6, and 7, to restrict the scope of your analysis to a desired subset of applicants. For additional help with the Query function, select *Help / How do I...? / Create a Query* within the QA Tool software or review (<http://qaprogram.air.org/download/toolforschool-Queries.doc>)

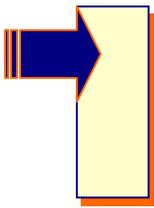


It is important that you take the time to think through the issues raised above. Without a little forethought, it is easy to get lost in a sea of numbers that aren’t focused on the issues of importance to your school.

- Are you most concerned with changes to Pell Grants? If so, the *Pell Corrected Records Report* may be the place for you to start.
- Are you equally concerned in accurately awarding subsidized loans, institutional resources, and state need-based grants? Then you may be better off focusing on the *Field Range Report with Corrected Records Counts*.
- How does your school treat student information differently during your verification process based on the dependency status of the applicant? If your verification of student information varies by dependency status, then you should consider analyzing *Field Increments* based on student information separately by

dependency status. Analysis of *Field Increments* based on parent reported information should always be restricted to dependent students.

- Are you especially interested in a particular subset of students? If so, you may want to restrict the analysis to that group. For example, assume that your school verifies all out of state students, and you are interest in whether not verifying all income ranges within this specific population is equally necessary. To find out, add the "Student's state of legal residence not equal to your institution's state" to your "school verification flag" query and run the *Field Range Report with Corrected Records Counts*, using a *Field Increment* based on Parent's Adjusted Gross Income.

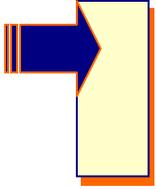


The answers to the above questions will help you set up an analysis plan that meets your institution's situation and needs. See Step 2 for step-by-step instructions on printing reports. See Step 3 for pointers on how to interpret your results and suggestions for additional analysis.

Step 2 **Generating Reports**

The QA Tool provides two different reports that present changes to FAFSA information across a range of values on a single data element. If you are interested in all changes to EFC (the awarding of all types of need-based financial aid), then use the *Field Range Report with Corrected Field Counts*. If wish to concentrate your analysis on the impact of changes to FAFSA information on Pell Grant eligibility, then print the *Pell Corrected Record Report*. Both reports will help you to answer the following questions:

- Within which ranges did the greatest degree of change in FAFSA information occur?
- Within which ranges were corrections most associated with EFC increase?
- Within which ranges were corrections most associated with EFC decrease?



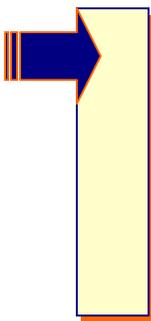
It is critical that you remember that the *Pell Corrected Records Report* focuses exclusively on applicants who were initially eligible to receive a Pell Grant, that is would have received a Pell if their initial application data were correct. Therefore, "EFC Increase" in this report refers only to cases where an initial Pell award was reduced, and "EFC Decrease" reflects only cases where an initial Pell award was increased. Applicants who were not "initially" eligible for a Pell Grant are excluded from this report regardless of whether or not they became eligible after their initial application.

Despite the need to keep in mind the restricted focus of the *Pell Corrected Records Report*, the steps for generating either report are very similar. Follow the directions below (substituting the name of the desired report in step 2):

1. Select *File / Print* or press the *Printer Icon* on the toolbar
2. In the *Print Dialog* window choose "*Field Range Report with Corrected Field Counts*" or "*Pell Corrected Records Report*" in the *Report* box
3. Make sure "*Multiple*" is selected to the right of the report title
4. Select *Report File Destination* (printer, file, or screen). The first time you run a report you will probably want to send the report to the screen for review. After ensuring that you are getting the output you want, choose printer or file to create a permanent copy
5. In the *Options* box, choose the *Field Increment Code* associated with the FAFSA data element used to define the ranges of applicants you wish to examine
6. In the *Dependency Status* box select *dependent* or *independent* appropriate with the FAFSA field used to define ranges of students. Please note that the default, "*D or I*," will select cases of either dependency status
7. The final choice in the *Options* box is *Sort Order*. This option allows you to sort the output in a variety of ways. Please note that only the organization, and not the content, of the report is affected by the *Sort Order* option. To have output sorted by the *Field Increment* being examined, simply use the

default option *Field Range*. Using *Field Corrected – Descending, EFC Increase – Descending, EFC Decrease – Descending, EFC Unchanged – Descending* will sort the output with the rows exhibiting the greatest degree of the designated change at the top of the report. The *–Ascending* versions of these options will print rows with the least amount of the change at the top of the page

8. In order to limit the analysis to only one kind of FAFSA change (“verified” or “spontaneous”) and potentially additional conditions, press the *Selection Criteria* button on the bottom left corner of the *Print* window
9. Once in the *Selection Criteria* window, select the (...) button next to *Query Title* box. This opens the *Query Grid*. We recommend that you begin your analysis by using the “*Verified Students*” query to select only verified students. As discussed in Step 1, you may want to restrict the scope of analysis further to a specific subset of cases. Select *OK* in the *Query Grid* window and select *OK* in the *Selection Criteria* window to limit analysis to only those students that have been verified
10. Press *OK* in the *Print* window to generate the report



We recommend that you complete steps 1-10 separately using either ranges of income or ranges of a FAFSA element that was found to be associated with EFC changes in other analysis (see Activity 1). We also recommend that you conduct a separate analysis of dependent and independent applicants, making the appropriate dependency status choices in steps 5 and 6. This will give you two reports to examine, one of dependent students and the other for independent students.

Step 3

Reading the Reports

After you have generated your reports, what should you look for? Look for ranges of FAFSA values associated with:

- The greatest number of changes to FAFSA fields (note that each record has multiple fields)

- The greatest number of records experiencing an EFC increase
- The greatest number of records experiencing an EFC decrease
- The least amount of changes to FAFSA fields (note that each record has multiple fields)
- The greatest number of records experiencing no EFC change

Some may prefer to use the *Sort Option* in the *Field Range with Corrected Field Counts* to print multiple versions of the output to help them identify the most and the least problematic ranges. Others may find it easier to work from a single version of the report sorted by the *Field Increment* ranges.

After identifying your **most** and **least** problematic FAFSA ranges, relate your findings to your verification practices. You can use this information to assess your current verification system's capacity to address ranges identified as being problematic. You also want to consider eliminating the burden of verification from the applicants within the least problematic ranges.

For the **most** problematic ranges, that is, ranges with the greatest extent of EFC change, ask yourself the following:

- Does our school currently target applicants in this range for verification, that is select students for verification simply because they report values within the range?
- If our school does not explicitly target applicants, do you believe that your school currently "catches" the majority of cases in the problematic ranges through your institutional verification profiles? You can find out the answer to this question by following these instructions:
 1. Repeat "Step 2", substituting the "non-verified student" query in step 9
 2. Calculate the total number of applicants in the problematic range among the unverified population by summing up the record counts ("*EFC Increased, EFC Decreased, and EFC Unchanged*") in the new "unverified" report. Remember that you cannot assume that the "paid on" information is correct among

unverified students, so you cannot rely on the accuracy of the column description for these cases. The total count, however, is valid

3. Perform the same calculation for the problematic range in the original "verified" report to arrive at the total count of cases here
 4. Divide the total count of records in the "verified" report by the total number of applicants in the range ("verified" count plus "unverified" count). This is the proportion of applicants in the problematic range currently being verified
 5. Evaluate the proportion using your professional judgment. Higher ratios mean that you are verifying a high percentage of the problematic range
- Do you suspect the EFC changes in problematic ranges of your selected *Field Increment* are attributable to specific responses on other FAFSA items? You can calculate the percentage of EFC increases and decreases within a range that have a specific value(s) on another FAFSA item(s) by rerunning your analysis and restricting your analysis to the desired sub-sample. Such a sub-sample may very well correspond to one of your institutional verification profiles. To do so, follow these instructions:
1. Repeat "Step 2", substituting a query that combined "school verification" and the desired other factor
 2. Divide the total number of applicants in the problematic range in the "*EFC Increased*" and "*EFC Decreased*" in the new "extra condition" report by the corresponding counts in the original "verified student" version of the report

If your verification system currently targets problematic ranges, you, obviously, are not in danger of missing anyone. You may discover the opportunity to exclude non-problematic ranges in the discussion below. If your school does not explicitly target problematic ranges, you can use the percentage of the identified range that is verified to help evaluate the adequacy of your current verification system's treatment of problematic ranges. The degree to which other factors that are incorporated into your verification system account for the "*EFC Increased*" and "*EFC Decreased*" cases within a problematic range is an additional means for evaluating your school's response.

For the **least** problematic ranges, that is ranges where corrections to FAFSA fields are relatively rare or where a large number of changes do not affect aid eligibility, ask yourself the following:

- Would it be prudent to remove this range of values from my school's verification population? Is there little or no benefit of verifying applicants in this range in terms of changing aid awards?
- How should cases in non-problematic ranges be removed from your verification profiles so as to eliminate only the cases where no change in aid occurred? To see which of your institutional profiles may not be adversely affected by removing cases within a generally non-problematic range follow these steps:
 1. Rerun "Step 2," substituting each institutional profile for the "verified student" query – be sure to include any additional restrictions you imposed in "Step 2" in newly created and titled versions of your profile queries
 2. Evaluate the aid implications for range in question separately for each profile
 3. Consider excluding the non-problematic range of applicants on a profile by profile basis

If there appears to be absolutely no benefit to verifying cases in the problematic range, then a blanket exclusion of this range from ALL verification profiles might be in order. If the results are somewhat mixed (which is more likely), consider running the original report separately for each institutional profile. Consider eliminating the range from profiles where the benefit, if any, is extremely small. Retain the generally non-problematic range within specific profiles where applicants in the range actually experience changes to their aid eligibility.